

# Sherman Alexie:

## *A Collection of Critical Essays*

■ *Edited by Jeff Berglund and Jan Roush*

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## CHAPTER 5

# This Is What It Means to Say Reservation Cinema:

### *Making Cinematic Indians in Smoke Signals*

*I don't remember that fire. I only have the stories,  
and in every one of those stories, I could fly.*

—THOMAS BUILDS-THE-FIRE

From the earliest days of cinematic history in the United States, when Thomas Edison filmed performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, films with Indian characters and themes have been popular and, at least for Hollywood studios and filmmakers, profitable.<sup>1</sup> The popularity and profitability of these films rest on the conventional plots that affirm European or European American superiority and the "savage" warriors, noble companions, wise sachems, and seductive "squaws" that populate them. With a monopoly on writing, directing, and acting—even in the Native roles—non-Indians controlled the construction of Native identity and culture for the first century of filmmaking in the United States. To construct cinematic Indians, non-Native filmmakers relied on visible ethnic markers, such as artificially browned skin, feathers, paint, and buckskin, that reduced Native identities and cultures to a code of signs easily translatable by a non-Native audience.<sup>2</sup> While Hollywood often promotes these

cinematic Indians as authentic, Gerald Vizenor (Anishinabe) calls them pure simulations that indicate “the absence of the tribal real.”<sup>3</sup>

There was considerable excitement, therefore, for the premiere of *Smoke Signals* (1998) at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. Screenwriter Sherman Alexie (Spokane and Coeur d’Alene) and director Chris Eyre (Cheyenne and Arapahoe) promoted *Smoke Signals* as “the first feature film written, directed, and co-produced by Indians to ever receive a major distribution deal.”<sup>4</sup> One implication of this statement about the primarily Indian cast and crew is that the film contains neither a conventional Hollywood narrative about Indians nor conventional roles for the Indian characters.

Alexie, Eyre, and the actors in *Smoke Signals* challenge conventional Hollywood images of and narratives about Indians by avoiding depictions of specific cultural materials, beliefs, and practices that are frequently exoticized, romanticized, misrepresented, or otherwise exploited. There are no buckskin clothes, beaded moccasins, feathers, warbonnets, medicine bundles, peace pipes, or Coeur d’Alene religious ceremonies in *Smoke Signals*. Instead, Alexie, Eyre, and the actors create characters who remind each other and the audience that they are Indians and the film occurs in Indian time, Indian history, and an Indian cultural space where they laugh at Indian humor.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to eliminating cultural markers from the film, Alexie and Eyre make residing on the Coeur d’Alene Reservation an important part of the identity of the characters. There is a biographical motivation for Alexie to set the film there, but the decision to shoot on location also helped establish the Coeur d’Alene identity of the characters without exploiting the tribal nation’s culture. As indicators of Coeur d’Alene identity, spatial or geographic markers connect the characters to a primarily Indian-owned and occupied landscape and allow the filmmakers to privilege familial and communal, or “communitist,” rather than cultural, identities.<sup>6</sup> Alexie’s focus in the screenplay on Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s role also contributes to a Native cinematic presence that is communally informed, in this case, by the memory and imagination of the community’s storyteller.

Alexie based the screenplay of *Smoke Signals* on stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), in which, as the title

indicates, his characters resist non-Native definitions of what constitutes an authentic Indian. In his early poetry, fiction, and essays, Alexie frequently acknowledges the power of popular culture to influence both non-Native perceptions of Natives and their self-perceptions.<sup>7</sup> In “Imagining the Reservation” from *The Lone Ranger*, for example, the narrator asks, “What do you believe in? Does every Indian depend on Hollywood for a twentieth-century vision?”<sup>8</sup> Alexie writes that Junior Polatkin, the drummer of Coyote Springs in *Reservation Blues* (1995), “always expected his visions to come true. Indians were *supposed* to have visions and receive messages from their dreams. All the Indians on television had visions that told them exactly what to do”<sup>9</sup> (italics in original). The band’s lead guitarist, Victor Joseph, also wonders about television Indians: “most Indians never drink. Nobody notices the sober Indians. On television, the drunk Indians emote. In books, the drunk Indians philosophize” (*RB*, 151). In “All I Wanted to Do Was Dance,” another story in *The Lone Ranger*, Joseph vomits immediately after viewing a commercial for a new candy bar. Television and film are literally dangerous to Alexie’s characters.<sup>10</sup> “It is the small things that hurt the most. The white waitress who wouldn’t take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins,” Victor thinks in “The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore” (*LRT*, 49).

Alexie draws a direct correlation between these “small things” and the poverty, violence, and alcoholism on his fictional Spokane Reservation. Images and stories of archetypal Tontos colonize the reservation and the imaginations of its residents. Those residents who are dominated by these images and stories have great difficulty imagining and then creating a world different from the one where they live.

Billy Jack, the mixed-blood protagonist of three films in the 1970s, is one of those characters that occupied Alexie’s imagination. Alexie’s reflections on Billy Jack suggest that popular-culture images are seductive, yet the narratives that disseminate those images do not capture the challenges in the real Native world. In the introduction to the *Smoke Signals* screenplay, Alexie comments,

I used to think movies were real. I mean, I thought, I truly believed, that every movie was actually a documentary. I

believed this long past the age when it could be considered cute. Once, in Spokane, Washington, when I was eleven years old, an older, larger white kid called me a “dirty fucking Indian.” And I jumped on him, despite his size, fully expecting to be rescued by Billy Jack, the half-breed Indian and Vietnam War veteran portrayed by Tom Laughlin in a series of pulp movies. (SS, x)

Alexie made the Billy Jack film a part of his eleven-year-old Spokane worldview, but the story put him in danger. Stories influence the way that we act in the world, yet there is little correlation between the world of an eleven-year-old Spokane boy and the stories controlled by non-Natives like Tom Laughlin, the writer, producer, director, and star of the Billy Jack films.<sup>11</sup> In “Billy Jack,” a poem in *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), Alexie quotes the character’s lines from a scene in an ice cream shop during which he saves a group of young Indians from several local white bullies. Alexie writes, “Oh, Billy Jack, I cheered then/just like all the other Indians/who ever saw your movies. I think/all Indians saw your movies, wanted you/to be real, wanted you to rise/and save the Indians from their sins./But all these years later, we need more.”<sup>12</sup> The more to which Alexie refers may be more accurate depictions of contemporary Native lives, but the issue is not necessarily the correlation between the real world and the story. Rather, Native audiences need films that nourish Native individuals and communities.<sup>13</sup>

The villainous savage stereotype was equally influential on Alexie’s imagination. In “I Hated Tonto (Still Do),” a *Los Angeles Times* article that includes another homage to Billy Jack, Alexie writes, “I loved movies about Indians, loved them beyond all reasoning and saw no fault with any of them. I loved John Ford’s *The Searchers*. I rooted for John Wayne as he searched for his niece for years and years. I rooted for John Wayne because I understood why he wanted to kill his niece. I hated those savage Indians just as much as John Wayne did.”<sup>14</sup> The image of the cinematic savage, Alexie suggests, has the power to encourage Indian hating among non-Natives and self-loathing among Natives. At the same time, he hates the invention, not the real Indians.

Alexie also suggests that recognizing the image as a simulation is often not enough to prevent it from influencing the way one views the world.

He notes, for example, that he hears iconographic ominous music when he walks in public, and he hates Tonto “because he was the only cinematic Indian who looked like me.”<sup>15</sup> Whether hero or villain, and whether played by a Native or non-Native actor, cinematic Indians haunt him.

*Smoke Signals* appears as a corrective at a time in cinematic history when Hollywood studios were attempting to repackage these stereotypical cinematic Indians and reinvigorate traditional westerns. At the annual Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards in March 1991, *Dances With Wolves*, with a screenplay by Michael Blake based on his novel of the same name, won seven Academy Awards, including best picture, a best director honor for Kevin Costner, best cinematography, and best screenplay. The film’s financial and mainstream critical success, and its role as an important nexus for discussions of conflict between the non-Native world and Native Americans, make *Dances With Wolves* an important indicator of the status of Indians in Hollywood in the early 1990s. The film, which Alexie critiques in the screenplay for *Smoke Signals*, forecloses on any future for the late-nineteenth-century Lakotas that it depicts.

The response of Native Americans to *Dances With Wolves* was not unanimous. Actors and actresses such as Floyd Red Crow Westerman (Dakota) and Tantoo Cardinal (Metis/Cree) praised the film as, Cardinal explains, “an immense breakthrough in Hollywood’s perception of native people,” though some Native scholars and cultural critics denounced it as a colonialist narrative.<sup>16</sup> Ward Churchill explains that the film perpetuates “the racist mythology so important to conventional justifications for America’s ‘winning of the West.’” Costner “holds closely to certain sympathetic stereotypes of Euroamerican behavior on the ‘frontier,’ at least insofar as he never quite explains how completely, systematically and persistently the invaders violated every conceivable standard of human decency in the process of conquest.”<sup>17</sup> The film, in fact, almost completely ignores the colonial violence committed against Native Americans. Though the plot suggests an attack by the U.S. Army on the Lakotas is imminent, Costner ends the film before the battle occurs. By not depicting the violence that was committed against the Lakotas, Costner avoids condemnation of the United States and any serious discussion of

who was responsible for the warfare that was so devastating to Native communities.

Louis Owens (Choctaw and Cherokee) also reads the film as a colonialist apology. He writes of the difficulty he has understanding the attraction of the wolf, Two Socks, to Dunbar:

My guess is that Two Socks is an essential metaphor for the submission of natural America to the “white god”—as Blake repeatedly calls Lieutenant Dunbar—who has come to stake his colonial claim to the territory. In this role, Two Socks effectively foreshadows the submission of the Lakotas to the same white god, and together wolf and Indian serve to authorize the rightful role of the European invader in asserting his dominion over the continent and its occupants.<sup>18</sup>

Owens adds that *Dances With Wolves* is “the perfect, exquisite reenactment of the whole colonial enterprise in America, and it is the most insidious vehicle yet for this familiar message because it comes beautifully disguised as its opposite: a revisionist, politically correct western.”<sup>19</sup> Blake and Costner change certain generic conventions of cinematic westerns: Native actors and actresses play Lakotas who speak their own language, rather than a monosyllabic pidgin English; the camera remains in Indian territory, rather than in a white settlement or military encampment; the narrative distinguishes Lakotas as individuals, rather than representatives of a singular, inflexible Indian identity.

However, the focus is still on a white hero, who in this film controls the construction both of the story and Native identity through his voice-over narration and the entries and sketches in his diary. The culmination of the plot shows this white hero/narrator returning to a white world with a white woman, Stands-With-a-Fist, whom he has recovered from a de facto captivity with the Lakotas. Civilization promises redemption for these white characters, but the end of the film implies doom for the Lakotas.

The audience learns in the postscript that, in spite of Dunbar’s return to the white world with the recovered captive, the hero’s promised social

activism on behalf of the Lakotas does not change that white world's colonial intentions. The postscript reads, "Thirteen years later, their homes destroyed, their buffalo gone, the last band of free Sioux submitted to white authority at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. The great horse culture of the plains was gone and the American frontier was soon to pass into history."<sup>20</sup> In this brief narrative of conquest, the perpetrators of the violence are undefined, implied subjects of sentences in passive voice. Though the Sioux are apparently not passive witnesses to their conquest, the act that Blake and Costner allow "the last band of free Sioux" is submission to an invasive military and immigrant presence defined as an ambiguous "white authority." In addition, Blake and Costner efface contemporary Indians from the landscape—Siouan culture, the postscript explains, no longer exists.

*Dances With Wolves* did not exist in a cinematic or ideological vacuum but was the most visible of the films in the 1990s that addressed Native interaction with descendants of Europeans. Jacqueline Kilpatrick (Choctaw and Cherokee) traces the history of images of Native Americans from silent films to the 1990s and sees little change in them.<sup>21</sup> Films such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *Thunderheart* (1992), *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), *Last of the Dogmen* (1995), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *The Scarlet Letter* (1995), *Pocahontas* (1995), *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), and *U-Turn* (1997) repackage narratives of conquest and rearticulate apologies for colonialism for a 1990s audience.<sup>22</sup> In a culture where people watch stories as often as they read them, these cinematic narratives influence non-Native perceptions of Native Americans in the same way as the magazines and newspapers in the nineteenth century that published frontier stories of bloodthirsty, drunken savages and treatises on the "noble savages" who yearned for civilization, Christianity, and democratic government.<sup>23</sup>

Resistance to stereotypical representations is a key component of Alexie's Indian characters in *Smoke Signals*, while the storytelling diverges dramatically from the plots of conventional westerns. The primary narrative movement in the film is the journey of Victor Joseph, played by Adam Beach (Ojibwa), and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, played by Evan Adams (Coast Salish), to Arizona to recover the ashes of Victor's long-absent father, Arnold Joseph, played by Gary Farmer (Cayuga). As they ride

the bus south from the Coeur d'Alene Reservation in Idaho, Victor—who throughout the film responds with irritation to his friend's storytelling—asks Thomas, “You're always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you seen *Dances With Wolves*? A hundred, maybe two hundred times?” After Thomas offers an embarrassed look as his response, Victor continues, “Oh, jeez, you have seen it that many times, haven't you? Man. Do you think that shit is for real? God. Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?” As the conversation continues, Victor tells Thomas he needs to look like a menacing, stoic warrior. But when Victor tells Thomas “to look like you just got back from killing buffalo,” Thomas protests, “But our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fishermen.” Victor responds, “You want to look like you just came back from catching a fish? It ain't *Dances With Salmon*, you know?” Alexie mocks romanticized images of Indians as both stoic and savage warriors while also noting the way that these representations influence the self-images of individual Indians, in this case, Victor. In addition, he highlights European American culture's primary interest in Plains tribes as the source of cinematic Indians, a focus that ignores the majority of tribes and the vast cultural differences among them. The hypothetical film *Dances With Salmon* would not have been as commercially successful as *Dances With Wolves*, Alexie suggests, and ignoring tribes like the Spokane and Coeur d'Alene in the inland Pacific Northwest contributes to their effacement from history and the contemporary landscape.

Victor's comments to Thomas demonstrate that Hollywood has influenced his self-image, and in terms of Alexie and Eyre's construction of a cinematic Indian identity, the satire in this scene indicates primarily what his Indian characters are not. At a rest stop following the *Dances With Salmon* conversation, Thomas returns to the bus with his suit replaced by a T-shirt emblazoned with the words “Frybread Power,” his hair loose, and a stern look on his face. Victor looks pleased with Thomas's new warrior identity, though Thomas emphasizes that it is a highly stylized performance by smiling broadly and putting on his thick glasses. Once on the bus, they discover that two men—whom Alexie describes in the screenplay as “white cowboys”—have appropriated their seats (SS, 64). When they refuse to relinquish the seats after a stare-down with Victor, Thomas says, “Jeez, Victor, I guess your warrior look doesn't work every

time.” Victor’s Hollywood-referenced identity cannot function outside of a Hollywood narrative. The menacing warrior is a simulation that exists only in film, and though Victor can perform the stereotypical role, his attempt is as futile as Alexie’s hope that Billy Jack would step from the screen and save him from a hostile Indian hater in Spokane.

In the scene immediately following the failure of his stereotypical pose and the loss of their seats, Victor discovers a different way to fulfill the promise of his name. He says to Thomas, “You know, in all those movies, you never saw John Wayne’s teeth. Not once. I think there’s something wrong when you don’t see a guy’s teeth.” In the screenplay, Alexie writes that Victor is “pounding a powwow rhythm on the seat” (SS, 66), and he begins to sing a “49” called “John Wayne’s Teeth.” Alexie defines 49s in the short story “The Toughest Indian in the World” from the short story collection of the same name as “Indian blues . . . cross-cultural songs that combined Indian lyrics and rhythms with country-and-western and blues melodies.”<sup>24</sup> The lyrics pose the following questions about John Wayne’s teeth: “Are they false, are they real? Are they plastic, are they steel?” Though the cowboys appear to have defeated the Indians, Victor uses the 49 as an attack on a famous Hollywood Indian killer and an icon of European American masculinity and nationalistic pride. The song belittles John Wayne by reducing his identity to a single physical characteristic while the lyrics raise the question of the “reality” of John Wayne the film-studio product, who—as Alexie notes in the short story “Dear John Wayne”—changed his name from the conventionally feminine Marion Morrison (*TIW*, 196). Victor is not the only person in the scene giving a performance based on a Hollywood simulation, for John Wayne provides a culturally sanctioned source for the hostility and racism of the cowboys. The Hollywood cowboy, an image often constructed by such noncowboys as Ohio-born Roy Rogers, is as unreal, or as much a simulation, as the Hollywood Indian. Victor’s 49 and powwow rhythm, which the filmmakers mix with increasing volume into a version of “John Wayne’s Teeth” by the Eaglebear Singers, defeat the cowboys with humor and reclaim the bus as an Indian cultural space.

While his male characters are neither stoic warriors nor buffalo hunters, Alexie’s main female characters are neither princesses nor squaws, the two prevailing identities that non-Natives impose on Native women.

As Rayna Green (Cherokee) explains, the *princess* is a rescuer and helper of white men who “must defy her own people, exile herself from them, become white, and perhaps suffer death,” whereas squaws are sexually available to white men and “share in the same vices attributed to Indian men—drunkenness, stupidity, thievery, venality of every kind.”<sup>25</sup> Alexie defines two Coeur d’Alene women—Velma, played by Michelle St. John, and Lucy, played by Elaine Miles (Cayuse and Nez Perce)—by their sense of humor. The screenplay notes that they are “good-looking Indian women, although fairly goofy in their mismatched clothes and weird glasses” (SS, 34), and their attempts to be serious only elicit more laughter. They are also contemporary contraries, for they are driving their Chevy Malibu in reverse when they see Victor and Thomas walking on the road and offer to drive them to the bus station.<sup>26</sup> Arlene Joseph, played by Tantoo Cardinal, and Grandma Builds-the-Fire, played by Monique Mojica (Kuna/Rappahannock), are caring parents to Victor and Thomas, respectively, and Arlene is particularly well known for her fry bread. All four of these characters are definitively of the Coeur d’Alene Reservation: they are comfortable in the community and express no desire to leave, with or without white men.

Similarly to these four Coeur d’Alene characters, Suzy Song, played by Irene Bedard (Inupiat/Cree), is not defined by a relationship to a white man. She has moved from New York to Arizona—from East to West—where she works for Indian communities as an employee of the Indian Health Service. Her earlier life includes stealing from an old Indian woman at a powwow and, while in college, sleeping with her best friend’s boyfriend, but these past transgressions humanize, rather than demonize, her. Suzy and Arnold “keep each other’s secrets,” as she explains, and this willingness to protect each other defines their relationship. A crucial part of the identities of Alexie’s characters is that they care deeply about other Indians, even if they have just met. Though we know Suzy’s tribal identification—Mohawk—she is Indian within the context of the film because she shares personal information about her life as an Indian with Arnold during their first meeting, then keeps his ashes safe for his son.

There are several scenes in the film during which the characters remind each other and the audience that they are Indians, as if their identities may be in doubt because they do not look, act, live, or talk like

stereotypical cinematic Indians. At the beginning of the film, Thomas speaks in voice-over as an image of a house engulfed in flames brightens the night. Thomas establishes the context: “On the Fourth of July 1976, my mother and father celebrated white people’s independence with the biggest house party in Coeur d’Alene tribal history.” His statement underscores the distance between the characters in the film and any non-Native members of the audience. Indians, Thomas suggests, may still be waiting for a day to celebrate their independence. Additional examples of the construction of a cultural space distant from non-Natives include a scene with disc jockey Randy Peone, played by John Trudell (Santee Sioux), who speaks to his morning audience on the Fourth of July 1998. Peone tells his listeners, “And Coeur d’Alene people, our reservation is beautiful this morning. It’s a good day to be indigenous.” He adds, “It’s 8:00, Indian time.”

Eyre’s filming of this scene emphasizes the beauty of the reservation, whereas a non-Native filmmaker might have focused more heavily on what Alexie calls in his scene notes “the poverty, the ugliness of reservations” (SS, 158). Peone’s comments also remind viewers that some Indians may not subscribe to the same method of mechanical time keeping as other cultures. When Velma and Lucy finally drop Victor and Thomas at the bus station, Velma asks, “Do you guys got your passports? . . . You’re leaving the rez and going into a whole different country, cousin.” Thomas responds, “But it’s the United States,” and Lucy interjects, “Damn right it is. That’s as foreign as it gets. I hope you two got your vaccinations.”

Lucy’s comments, in addition to the on-screen identification at the beginning of the film and a roadside sign at the end, establish the Coeur d’Alene Reservation as the privileged landscape and narrative center, just as the Spokane Reservation is the narrative center in Alexie’s directorial debut, *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002).<sup>27</sup> In Alexie’s film, the Indians, rather than immigrants or U.S. Army troops, cross an arbitrary border or frontier into a dangerous and foreign world. The storytelling traditions are also different in this alien world. When Thomas reminds a young woman that he and Victor are more like “Tonto and Tonto” than the Lone Ranger and Tonto, his statement reaffirms the shift Alexie facilitates between *Smoke Signals* and conventional Hollywood films about Indians.

Though in jest, Thomas and Victor identify with Tonto as a hero—as the protagonist of the story—rather than the Lone Ranger.

Randy Peone's, Velma's, and Lucy's comments suggest that the term *reservation* is as important as the term *Indian* to a person's identity. His poetry, fiction, and nonfiction confirm Alexie's view of the reservation as a significant contributor to a resident's worldview. His short autobiography, "One Little Indian Boy," includes references to hydrocephalus, epileptic seizures, bed-wetting, and a suspicion that he might have been a fetal alcohol baby; Alexie explains, "I was a reservation Movie of the Week."<sup>28</sup> Poems where Alexie uses the term as an adjective include "Reservation Love Song" and "The Reservation Cab Driver" in *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992); "Reservation Graffiti" and "Reservation Stew" in *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993); and "Reservation Drive-In," "A Reservation Table of Elements," and "Reservation Mathematics" in *First Indian on the Moon* (1993). The three poems in *First Indian* illustrate Alexie's conception of the reservation as a force that influences a resident's perception of that which, like the periodic table and mathematics, may appear to have fixed meanings not subject to interpretation. In "A Reservation Table of Elements," Alexie offers a reservation perspective on aluminum and oxygen as they relate to one alcoholic, who is trying to quit drinking, and another, Lester Falls Apart, who drinks himself unconscious and stops breathing. A mixed-blood narrator in "Reservation Mathematics" discusses his life as the sum of two fractions while "Reservation Drive-In" is a lesson that most closely relates to Alexie's attempts in *Smoke Signals* to depict a contemporary reservation perspective. In the poem, Alexie presents the reservation responses to five Hollywood films, including *Star Wars*, which young Indian boys watch while they imagine their own battles with their fathers.

Reservation refers to a land base and community, rather than an ethnicity or culture, and by privileging this term in his poems, in fiction such as *Reservation Blues*, and in *Smoke Signals*, Alexie decreases the number of audience members who are cultural insiders. His strategy is exclusionary, and he chooses the reservation as the place least understood by most non-Natives; of least interest to most non-Native filmmakers, who prefer to make films set prior to the reservation era; and as the place generally

maligned in the mainstream media when reservations are mentioned at all. Even when a mainstream book about a reservation appears, such as Ian Frazier's *On the Rez*, Alexie argues, "Frazier's formal use of 'the rez' marks him as an outsider eager to portray himself as an insider."<sup>29</sup> Alexie's indignant response to Frazier's naïve and deceptive assumption of insider status at Pine Ridge is a rhetorical defense of reservation communities from potentially unfriendly outsiders.

The centrality of the reservation—a place that is both the point of departure and return in the film—aligns *Smoke Signals* with several of the most celebrated texts by Native authors: N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and *Ceremony* (1977) by Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko. These novels, to which Alexie's work has been unfavorably compared by Spokane writer Gloria Bird, helped establish the narrative structure in many works by Native authors of departure from and homecoming to a Native community. *Smoke Signals* addresses some of Bird's concerns about *Reservation Blues*, such as what she sees as excessive despair, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and the absence of lyrical evocations of the land.<sup>30</sup> The film depicts a strong Native community and mocks Hollywood stereotypes while the on-location filming shows the landscape of the Coeur d'Alene Reservation in a way that is not possible in a novel. The film also follows the narrative structure of *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony* much more closely than do the plots of Alexie's novels: *Reservation Blues*, which appears to be a consciously anti-*Ceremony* novel, ends with Thomas, Chess, and Checkers leaving the Spokane Reservation, and *Indian Killer* (1996) is about a protagonist in Seattle, John Smith, who lacks both community and reservation.

While novels by Native authors are more likely to be situated on a reservation, Hollywood films are usually set prior to or at the beginning of the reservation era. One result of Alexie's challenge to both literary and cinematic conventions is that Chris Eyre's film more closely fulfills the demands that scholars such as Bird make of Native artistic productions. In the film, the reservation almost speaks for itself, and the cinematography confirms Peone's comment that the landscape is indeed beautiful.

Culture is less important to Alexie's characters in *Smoke Signals*, therefore, than a shared community, geography, and history: the Fourth of July is a celebration of "white people's independence"; the United States

is a foreign country; and the heroes are Tontos, not Lone Rangers, army officers, or explorers. Alexie even refrains from emphasizing Arnold's and Victor's mourning ritual of cutting their hair. He comments in his scene notes, "I wanted to make it more clear, but I didn't want to spoon-feed the audience. I also didn't want to make haircutting a stereotypical Indian act, done on a mountaintop or something. I mean, the symbolic act of haircutting as mourning exists in all cultures, so this wasn't an issue of generic Indian spirituality. It was an issue of personal spiritual choice" (SS, 154). Even when Alexie does include a more overt reference to traditions not practiced as frequently in non-Native cultures, such as his description in the screenplay of Thomas's "very traditionally braided hair" (SS, 7), he and Eyre do not risk making the tradition exotic narratively or visually.

Alexie is as reluctant to incorporate visible signifiers of ethnicity in the film as he is in his writing. In an interview with John Purdy in *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Alexie says,

There's a lot of people pretending to be "traditional," all these academic professors living in university towns, who rarely spend any time on a reservation, writing all these "traditional" books. Momaday—he's not a traditional man. And there's nothing wrong with that, I'm not either, but this adherence to the expected idea, the bear and all this imagery. I think it is dangerous, and detrimental. . . . I want to take Indian lit *away* from that, and away from the people who own it now. (italics in original)

Near the end of the interview, he adds, "We shouldn't be writing about our traditions, we shouldn't be writing about our spiritual practices. . . . I think it's dangerous, and that's really why I write about day-to-day life."<sup>31</sup> In his response to Purdy's question, Alexie uses the word *dangerous* twice and thereby emphasizes what he understands is at stake in the representations of Indian culture, whether in writing or film. As Rennard Strickland (Osage and Cherokee) explains, "This question of media image is significant for Native Americans. It transcends entertainment. It influences law. It dominates resource management. The media profoundly impacts every aspect of contemporary American Indian policy and

shapes both the general cultural view of the Indian as well as Indian self-image.”<sup>32</sup> Alexie and Eyre, it seems, made *Smoke Signals* with Strickland’s warnings in mind.

Alexie also distinguishes the film from Hollywood productions in several other ways that—though not distinctly Native American—emphasize his desire to tell a different story and construct distinctive characters. The narrative structure of *Smoke Signals*, for example, is circular, rather than linear. Eyre follows the directions in Alexie’s screenplay to use match cuts, flashbacks, wipes, and swipes to shift the story from the past to the present: the journey to Arizona. A young Victor opens a door and walks through the other side as an adult Victor, or an adult Victor looks into a mirror at a rest stop, and when the camera turns again, he is a young Victor back on the reservation. The circular narrative liberates Alexie’s characters from the linear structure of so many films about the frontier that reinforce the perceived inevitability of the “progress” of civilization across the continent.

In addition, images of fire bind the characters together, much like a pattern of symbols unifies a poem or work of fiction. Victor’s father, Arnold, sets fire to the Builds-the-Fire home on the Fourth of July 1976; as he narrates in voice-over, Thomas says some children are pillars of flame, and some are pillars of ash, and adds that he and Victor are children of both; Victor and Thomas argue over a barrel in which a fire burns, and Eyre positions the camera so that the fire reflects in Thomas’s glasses. After Victor and Thomas have finally recovered Arnold’s ashes, Eyre constructs a montage of Suzy Song setting Arnold’s trailer on fire with images of the Builds-the-Fire home in flame and Victor and Thomas returning home. Alexie explains in his scene notes, “A bad fire destroyed Arnold’s life. A good fire redeems him” (SS, 167). Finally, the film’s title reclaims and revises an image in Hollywood westerns that indicates danger to the white heroes. In *Smoke Signals*, smoke and ash are the residue of a vibrant community’s powerful emotions: love and anger, joy and sorrow. The smoke binds the past to the present and unites the members of the community: Thomas, Grandma Builds-the-Fire, Victor, Arnold, Arlene, and all the people who attended the Fourth of July party at the Builds-the-Fire home that ended in the death of Thomas’s parents.

Thomas's storytelling, particularly about Victor's father, also binds the past to the present and the members of the community together. Thomas focuses his stories on the way that Arnold Joseph was a father figure to him, and, though the stories irritate Victor, they also give him a much more complex understanding of his father. The final scene suggests the influence that Thomas's stories have had on Victor. As Thomas recites lines from Dick Lourie's poem "Forgiving Our Fathers," Victor throws his father's ashes into the Spokane River and collapses in grief. Thomas's stories help redeem Arnold Joseph and give Victor the strength to forgive his father for leaving and to grieve.<sup>33</sup> Particularly when compared to other films with major distribution deals, the culmination of *Smoke Signals* is extraordinary for the way Alexie, in the screenplay, and Eyre, as the director, privilege the interior landscapes of contemporary Native men.

The participation of Indians as members of the cast and crew makes the film, for Alexie, the clearest articulation of reservation cinema. In the scene notes, Alexie mentions three times that other filmmakers should "cast Indians as Indians, because you'll get better performances" (SS, 158). For example, Alexie writes of the scene where Velma drives in reverse down a highway leaving the reservation, "Michelle St. John and Elaine Miles give what may be the most rezziest Indian performances in cinematic history. There is no non-Indian actor in the world who could have given these performances. These performances are not the result of years of training and study on how to 'act' like an Indian. They are the result of years of living as an Indian, of years of 'being' Indian" (SS, 158). Whatever Alexie's definition of being Indian is, he affirms that self-representation should take precedence over externally imposed constructions of identity. Self-representation can produce "the most rezziest of Indian performances," whereas mainstream Hollywood films depict not only misrepresentations but an absence of reality.

In his voice-over at the beginning of the film, Thomas says, "I don't remember that fire. I only have the stories, and in every one of those stories, I could fly." Throughout the film, other characters make many references to telling stories, telling lies, and telling the truth. The evidence in Alexie's work suggests that he wants his audience members to see that we choose to believe particular stories about the world: we choose to believe

that Billy Jack is a real mixed-blood hero, or that John Wayne and Gene Autry are real cowboys. Victor, who early in the film rigidly adheres to a particular idea of Indianness heavily influenced by Hollywood, finally chooses to act in accordance with a story that does not require him to be a stoic Plains warrior who has just returned from hunting buffalo. At the end of the film, Thomas says he will take part of Victor's father's ashes and throw them into the Spokane River, after which he will see Victor's father rise from the river as a salmon. Victor plans to participate in the same personal ritual, though he says it would be like "throwing things away when they have no use." However, when Victor releases his father's ashes, he collapses in grief. His identity is no longer beholden to the menacing, stoic warriors of Hollywood films. He is free of their influence at the end of the film and, like Thomas, can begin to construct his own identity in relation to his family and reservation community. The film ends in redemption, rather than doom. Victor is twice redeemed: from the grief of losing his father and his captivity within Hollywood definitions of who he must be as an American Indian man.

We construct our identities in reference to stories, Alexie is proposing, and, therefore, the stories we hear become defining elements in our understanding of ourselves. With their subversive humor and persistent hopefulness, Thomas's stories challenge conventional Hollywood images of Indian men and provide Victor with an alternative model of Native masculinity. At the end of the film, Victor is a Coeur d'Alene man in mourning for the Coeur d'Alene father whom he has carried home. Finally and figuratively, Victor dances with salmon.

## NOTES

1. Thomas Edison made these films, which contain the first cinematic images of Indians, on September 24, 1894. He filmed a ghost dance and a buffalo dance, for example. The films can be viewed at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html> after searching for "Edison and Indians."
2. For a description of the way filmmakers turned Native actors into "authentic" cinematic Indians, see Archie Fire Lame Deer (Lakota) and Richard Erdoes, *Gift of Power: The Life and Teachings of a Lakota Medicine Man*. In discussing his acting career, Lame Deer describes being sprayed with body paint.

3. See Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, particularly the chapter “Postindian Warriors,” for his discussion of simulated Indians and the counterimages produced by the “postindian warriors of simulations” (3). He writes, “Western movies are the muse of simulations, and the absence of humor and real tribal cultures” (6).
4. Sherman Alexie, *Smoke Signals: A Screenplay*, xi (hereafter cited in the text as *SS*). The distinction “major distribution deal” is crucial. James Young Deer (Winnebago), whom Beverly Singer (Santa Clara Pueblo) calls “the first Native person to become a ‘movie actor’” (15) after his performance in D. W. Griffith’s *The Mended Lute* (1909), continued his Hollywood career by directing *A Cheyenne Brave* (1910), *The Yaqui Girl* (1911), *Lieutenant Scott’s Narrow Escape* (1911), and *Red Deer’s Devotion* (1911). During the same era, Edwin Carewe (Chickasaw) directed *The Trail of the Shadow* (1917) and *Ramona* (1928). Will Rogers (Cherokee) was also a film actor, writer, director, and producer from the mid-1910s to the mid-1930s. Singer discusses specifically six of the many films and videos by Native Americans that precede *Smoke Signals*. Those films are *Hopiit* (1982), directed by Victor Masayesva Jr. (Hopi); *Lighting the Seventh Fire* (1995), directed by Sandra Osawa (Makah); *Navajo Talking Picture* (1984), directed by Arlene Bowman (Navajo); *High Horse* (1994), directed by Randy Redroad (Cherokee); *Hands of History* (1994), directed by Loretta Todd (Metis/Cree); and *A Video Book* (1994), directed by Beverly Singer.

Both Singer and Rennard Strickland catalog films from the 1960s through the 1990s in which Native Americans played an important role in writing, acting, directing, and producing. For example, both Vizenor and N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) have screenwriting credits—Vizenor for *Harold of Orange* (1984), directed by Michael Weise, and Momaday for *House Made of Dawn* (1987), based on his novel and directed by Richardson Morse. Made-for-television films include *Medicine River* (1993), adapted by Thomas King (Cherokee) from his novel of the same name, and *Grand Avenue* (1996), which was written and coexecutive-produced for HBO by Greg Sarris (Coast Miwok) and based on his novel of the same name. After *Smoke Signals*, Eyre coproduced and directed *Skins* (2002), which was based on Adrian Louis’s novel of the same name (Lovelock Paiute). Eyre directed *Skinwalkers* (2002) for PBS, and he produced *The Doe Boy* (2001), which was directed by Redroad. The Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, with Red-Horse Native Productions, produced *Naturally Native* (1998), which was produced by Yvonne Russo (Sicangu Lakota) and executive-produced by Dawn Jackson (Saginaw Chippewa) and codirected by Jennifer Wynne Farmer and Valerie Red-Horse Mohl.

Indigenous-made films also gained prominence around the world in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Examples include the Maori films *Once Were Warriors* (1994), directed by Lee Tamahori; and *Whale Rider* (2002), directed by Niki Caro; and the Inuit film *Atanarjuat* (2001), directed

by Zacharias Kunuk. Phillip Noyce's *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), which is about Australia's boarding schools for Aborigines, did not have the same Indigenous control as the other three films. See Singer, *Wiping the Warpaint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video*; and Strickland, "Tonto's Revenge, or, Who Is That Seminole in the Sioux Warbonnet? The Cinematic Indian!" in *Tonto's Revenge: Reflections on American Indian Culture and Policy* 17–45.

5. For a discussion of Indian humor, see Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. Deloria writes, "The Indian people are exactly the opposite of the popular stereotype. I sometimes wonder how anything is accomplished by Indians because of the apparent overemphasis on humor within the Indian world" (146–47; page references are to the 1988 edition).
6. Near the end of a general overview of Native American literature, Jace Weaver (Cherokee) asserts, "I would contend that the single thing that most defines Indian literatures relates to this sense of community and commitment to it." He calls this characteristic of Native American writing *communitism*. If *Smoke Signals* is representative, Weaver's statement may also apply to films made primarily by Native filmmakers. See Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community*, 43.
7. See chapter four, "Muting White Noise: The Popular Culture Invasion in Sherman Alexie's Fiction," in my book, *Muting White Noise: Native American and European American Novel Traditions*.
8. Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, 151 (hereafter cited in the text as *LRT*).
9. Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues*, 18 (hereafter cited in the text as *RB*).
10. As Alexie learned after several years in the movie business, Hollywood directors and studio executives are equally dangerous. See Sherman Alexie, "Introduction: Death in Hollywood," 7–11, in which he explains that he will lose his love of writing if he continues to work in Hollywood. At the time, he planned to leave after fulfilling his contractual obligation to write screenplays.
11. The three films are *Billy Jack* (1971), *The Trial of Billy Jack* (1974), and *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* (1977). Laughlin even named his company Billy Jack Enterprises.
12. Sherman Alexie, *First Indian on the Moon*, 114 (hereafter cited in the text as *FIM*).
13. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Sioux) observes that "how the Indian narrative is told, how it is nourished, who tells it, who nourishes it, and the consequences of its telling are among the most fascinating—and, at the same time, chilling—stories of our time." See "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story" in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, 111.

14. Sherman Alexie, "I Hated Tonto (Still Do)."
15. Ibid.
16. For the Cardinal quote, see Brian D. Johnson, "Straight-Arrow Hero: Kevin Costner Touches the Native Earth," 58. Other critics such as Michael Wayne Sarf describe the way the film contains all the familiar stereotypes of cinematic Indians, and Richard Alleva and Larry Bowden denounced Costner specifically for villainizing Pawnees. See Sarf, "Oscar Eaten by Wolves," 62–70; Alleva, "A Filmmaker's Instincts: Costner's *Dances With Wolves*," 18–19; and Bowden, "*Dances With Wolves*," 391–96.
17. See Ward Churchill, "Lawrence of South Dakota: *Dances With Wolves* and the Maintenance of the American Empire," in *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians*, 244.
18. Louis Owens, "Apocalypse at the Two-Socks Hop: Dancing With the Vanishing American," in *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Family, Film, Place*, 114.
19. Ibid.
20. *Dances With Wolves*, directed by Kevin Costner (Orion Pictures, 1990).
21. See Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*; and, for a similar discussion, see Michael Hilger, *From Savage to Nobleman: Images of Native Americans in Film*. Singer also includes a chapter on Hollywood representations of Indians in *Wiping the Warpaint*.
22. Films such as *Maverick* (1994), directed by Richard Donner, and *Shanghai Noon* (2000), directed by Tom Dey, contain scenes that mock conventional Hollywood depictions of Native Americans. *Dead Man* (1996), directed by Jim Jarmusch, and *Dance Me Outside* (1995), directed by Bruce McDonald, provide more complex portraits of Native people. Though not written or directed by Native Americans, the films benefited from the participation of Native writers and/or actors. In "I Hated Tonto (Still Do)," Alexie writes about watching *Powwow Highway* (1989), directed by Jonathan Wacks: "I cried when I saw it in the theater, then cried again when I stayed and watched it again a second time. I mean, I loved that movie. I memorized whole passages of dialogue. But recently, I watched the film for the first time in many years and cringed in shame and embarrassment with every stereotypical scene."
23. See John M. Coward, *The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820–90*.
24. Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, 23 (hereafter cited in the text as *TIW*).
25. Though Green does not mention films, her observations apply to cinematic Indian women. The quintessential princess is Pocahontas. See Rayna Green, "The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture," 704, 711.
26. Contraries appear primarily in Plains cultures. The Lakota and Dakotas called their contraries *heyo'ka*. A person became a contrary after the Thunder-beings visited in a dream. For a literary example of a *heyo'ka*, see

- Dakota author Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*. In his interviews with John Neihardt is a description of a heyo'ka ceremony in which Black Elk participated. The ceremony included the sacrifice of a dog, after which a participant offered the dog to the Thunder-beings in the west, then the north, east, and south, then the sky and the earth. In particular see the description of the heyo'kas ("sacred fool or rather sacred comedian") walking among the audience in Raymond J. Demallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*, 232–35.
27. *The Business of Fancydancing* focuses on Seymour Polatkin's departure for college and return to the Spokane Reservation after a childhood friend dies. At the end of the film, one Seymour (Evan Adams) watches a second Seymour (Evan Adams) leave the reservation after the funeral. The scene suggests the hold that the reservation has on its residents. The film also contains more specific Native and Spokane cultural ceremonies and creations than *Smoke Signals*, such as powwow dancing, the Spokane traditional song "Happy Dance," and "Osinilshatin," a song written by Michelle St. John and translated by Lillian Alexie into Spokane. The lyrics reinforce the image of Seymour leaving part of himself on the Spokane Reservation: "Memories hold you tight/When there's no comfort in white arms/Loneliness will bring you back/Where you belong." See Sherman Alexie, *The Business of Fancydancing: The Screenplay*, 134.
  28. Sherman Alexie, "One Little Indian Boy," in *Edge Walking on the Western Rim: New Works by 12 Northwest Writers*, 52.
  29. Sherman Alexie, "Some of My Best Friends," 3.
  30. Gloria Bird, "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*," 47–52.
  31. John Purdy, "Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," 8, 15–16.
  32. Strickland, "Tonto's Revenge," 17.
  33. See "Forgiving Our Fathers" in Dick Lourie, *Ghost Radio*. The screenplay has Alexie's original ending, and the "Scene Notes" contain a discussion of the conflict he had with Eyre about the end of the film. In the screenplay, Arnold Joseph's ashes become first a salmon and then Arnold himself rising from the river and returning to the Coeur d'Alene community.